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GEORGE ELIOT, 1819-1919

BY EDITH FRANKLIN WYATT

A VISITOR to Weimar in 1854 might have seen in the long summer evenings, two people, a man and a woman, walking and talking, or sitting and reading together on the green banks of the Ilm, in the beautiful fairy-like forest on the way to Tiefuhrt.

The man was a small and ugly person of about forty, chinless, bright-eyed with a great bulging forehead, "a miniature Mirabeau." He was George Henry Lewes, the most brilliant and bitter literary critic in London.

His companion was a tall, plain young woman, quietly and dowdily dressed but exquisitely graceful. She had the figure of a sylph, and a homely, long face crowned with abundant brown hair, and lighted by fine eyes, blue and deep, with a glance of great gentleness. She was a very quiet person; and all her movements were deliberate.

Lewes, it appears, fascinated everybody with whom he talked, by the wit and penetration of his conversation. George Eliot, then known as Marian Evans, seems to have fascinated nobody; to have had no interest in fascinating anybody. But everybody with whom she had ever lived loved her. Everybody confided in her. Everybody enjoyed her in that satisfactory enjoyment only to be derived from the presence of a person possessed of "the intelligences of the heart."

It is in this Weimar view; and as we see her in her diary of the period, while she reads, studies and writes reviews with her beloved companion, and listens to the variations of human experience about her, that I like best to re-

gard her—as a generous-hearted young woman, living freely in her intelligence, and with all the world before her.

It is too customary to conceive of an author of genius in the light of some one transitory aspect. George Eliot's readers consider her too often, as she was observed by passing acquaintances in the last two years of her life. They are too likely to think of her not as a real woman of lively faculties of thought and observation, but as the profile of an ageing celebrity with side-curls and lace ear-lappets.

The daughter of a well-to-do Midland farm-factor, Isaac Evans, the able land-agent of numerous estates, she had spent a studious girlhood of severe piety; had taken even in her teens a deep interest in the fortunes of the neighborhood poor; had made innumerable helpful visits down brown and chilling winter lanes to the hand-to-mouth, struggling poverty of the England of 1830-1840, visits that told her the great, world-wide, plain tale of mortal want and hardship in lonely neighborhoods.

Till thirty she had carried on this sympathetic observation of existence outside her home at Coventry; and inside its walls had devoted herself to linguistic pursuits, to learning English, German, French and Italian. At the instigation of liberal-minded English friends at Coventry she had translated Straus' *Life of Jesus* for publication in English. On her father's death, she had broken and dismantled their household together. With the little independent income she possessed she had settled herself in London lodgings, and begun to write reviews and translations. She became the assistant editor of the *Westminster Review*; and it was in this capacity at thirty-two that she had learned to know Lewes, who had been introduced to her by her friend Herbert Spencer.

Lewes' own existence was unsettled and wretched indeed at this period. His household was in confusion. His wife, the mother of his three children, had left him for another man. She had repented her change of feeling. She had returned to him. He had forgiven her. Again she had left him with another lover. Through a technicality of English law, on account of his reception of her after her infidelity he could not obtain a divorce.

It was at this juncture of domestic misery and mental

confusion that Herbert Spencer peculiarly befriended him. Lewes wrote of him afterwards:

I owe him a debt of gratitude. My acquaintance with him was the brightest ray in a very dreary, *wasted* period of my life. I had given up all ambition whatever, lived from hand to mouth and thought the evil of each day sufficient. The stimulus of his intellect, especially during our long walks, roused my energy once more and roused my dormant love of science. I owe Spencer another and a deeper debt. It was through him that I learned to know Marian—to know her was to love her—and since then my life has been a new birth. To her I owe all my prosperity and all my happiness. God bless her!

Such had been the history that preceded Lewes' and George Eliot's Weimar sojourn. They had left England together about three years after their first acquaintance; had been married in some German town, though they could not be married in England; and had launched themselves on a life of arduous work together, whose direction was at first in the field of belles-lettres and of scientific reviews.

George Eliot wrote to Mrs. Charles Bray, her girlhood and lifelong friend:

We are leading no life of self-indulgence, except indeed that, being happy in each other, we find everything easy. We are working hard to provide for others better than we provide for ourselves, and to fulfill every responsibility that lies upon us.

To support six people, mainly by review writing is an arduous task; and this task was that of Lewes and of George Eliot for two years now. Nevertheless in spite of her intense occupation in another literary field, she reveals, I think, in her journals of the time, the habit of thought of a fiction writer. Her ability in "concrete description" indeed led Lewes to suggest to her in Berlin that she attempt to write a novel. But the need of production immediately and certainly lucrative induced her to forego this effort in the art of fiction for the next two years.

They lived in London in these years, in circumstances so straitened that she mentions, during a vacation of a few days at Ilfracombe that they can afford to enjoy only twice a certain walk requiring a toll tax of sixpence. They had but one tiny, crowded little sitting-room where they carried on their writing, reading and study in their London lodgings.

She writes to her beloved friend, Mrs. Bray's sister, Sarah Hennell: "Our life has no incidents except such as take place in our own brains—nevertheless our life is intensely occupied and the days are far too short." She remarks later that their hours are all "accurately parcelled out;" and that she is "going out today for the first time in a fortnight."

They read and study voraciously, insatiably, English and Spanish and French and German—novels, essays, scientific articles, history biography, "*The Shaving of Shagpat*," Spinoza's *Ethics*, Griswold's *American Poets*.

We are delighting ourselves with Ruskin's third volume—I read it aloud for an hour or so after dinner; then we jump to the old dramatists, when Mr. Lewes reads to me as long as his voice will hold out, and after this we wind up the evening with Rymer Jones' *Animal Kingdom* by which I get a confused knowledge of branchiæ and such things—perhaps, on the whole, a little preferable to total ignorance. These are our *noctes*—without *cenae* for the present—occasionally diversified by very dramatic singing of Figaro, etc., which I think must alarm "that good man, the clergyman," who sits below us. . . . We are reading Gall's *Anatomie et Physiologie du Cerveau*, and Carpenter's *Comparative Physiology* aloud in the evenings; and I am trying to fix some knowledge about plexuses and ganglia in my soft brain which generally only serves me to remember that there is something I ought to remember.

In spite of this deprecating remark one receives an overwhelming picture of the mental range and activity of their life, and shares Henry James' belief that George Eliot lived "in the intelligence, a freer, larger life than probably had ever been the portion of any woman."

At last along the path of her many intellectual efforts she reaches her long-planned venture in fiction.

One morning as I was thinking what should be the subject of my first story, my thoughts merged themselves into a dreamy doze, and I imagined myself writing a story, of which the title was *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton*. I was soon wide awake again, and told G. He said, "Oh, what a capital title!" and from that time I had settled in my mind that this should be my first story. George used to say, "It may be a failure—it may be that you are unable to write fiction. Or perhaps it may be just good enough to warrant you trying again."

One of the most striking impressions of George Eliot's life that one receives from her biography as arranged by Mr. Cross is the immanence of Lewes in her entire history as an author of fiction. He knew every word, every shade

of all her tales and novels; aided her throughout their production, encouraged and sympathized at every turn; played the Game of Authors for them in the world of London with the utmost adroitness. It was he who inspired her in her middle years to begin her career as a novelist; and after his death she never wrote another line.

She lived in the golden age of novel-writing. Bound with our edition of *The Mill on the Floss*, which my father bought in 1860, are advertisements of novels by Thackeray, Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell in the English and American magazines of the day. Goethe and Walter Scott and Charlotte and Emily Bronte lived in her lifetime. Flaubert, George Sand and Turgenev were her contemporaries. Anthony Trollope was her neighbor and friend. She carried on a delightful correspondence with the authoress of the most widely-read novel on the globe in the mid-nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Yet even in the splendor of the golden age of fiction, George Eliot's novels differ from the other stars in glory. Their individual quality is instantly revealed in *The Sad Fortunes of Reverend Amos Barton*. A thousand tales have been written about women who died for love. No one else has ever presented that theme as George Eliot presents it in her first story. The portrait of the lovely Milly Barton, flinging all the force of her life into the endless, unselfish care of her blundering, kind husband and her five good little children, Milly who was done to death at last by overwork, by worry, by her innumerable steps and stitches and family services, by a prolonged strain of motherhood, affects one with a deeper sense of sorrow I think, because she is not too heroic. She is so very real. Her enjoyment of dress, her delight in the Countess' "pinkish-lilac silk" touches you with a regret for the poverties of her own wardrobe that puts you in a flash in the position of an intimate friend.

You cannot bear to have the soup spilt on her one black silk dress. You cannot bear to have her misunderstood by the stupidity of the neighbors. You cannot bear her increasing makeshifts to meet the family's increasing poverty, as the shallow prejudice of the congregation drifts further and further away from the Reverend Amos Barton. When she succumbs at last after all her pains, her great joys, her struggles, and whispers to her husband how

good he has been, and how happy he has made her; and dies, you are swept in your grief with a perception of the great strength of mortals and their great helplessness.

Milly Barton's tragedy has the fine simplicity of the common tragedies of uncounted devoted and courageous women. Its overtones are so exquisite that you forgive all its dull passages, its long discourses from the clergy, its occasional prolixity. The author's reflective power glances in a hundred intervals in the quiet scene of the parish of Shepperton, gives its narrative the distance and mystery of meditation, and makes it one with the lonely and heroic beauty of mortal life everywhere on earth.

As George Eliot composed and read to Lewes the first pages of her tale, his doubts as to whether she could write dialogue were dispelled.

There still remained the question whether I could command any pathos: and that was to be decided by the mode in which I treated Milly's death. One night G. went to town on purpose to leave me a quiet evening for writing it. I wrote the chapter from the news brought by the shepherd to Mrs. Hackit, to the moment when Amos is dragged from the bedside and I read it to G. when he came home. We both cried over it, and then he came up to me and kissed me, saying, "I think your pathos is better than your fun."

Launched in the field of publication by the sympathy and skill of Lewes, *The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton* gained an immediate success. The anonymous author was rapidly and widely understood.

She had set herself the final tragic and alluring standard of every writer of fiction—the standard so imaginatively described by Frank R. Stockton and Sir James Barrie—her own standard. From now on her life as a novelist became the struggle at once not to repeat herself and not to impoverish the quality of her work, which makes the drama of her biography.

In attaining at least one of her aims—that of not repeating her contributions—she was markedly successful. No two of her novels are alike. In quality, in my view at least, she equalled her first tale in many others; and repeatedly exceeded the general value of her first book, a volume of which Amos Barton is indeed a part, but including also the far less able narratives of *Janet's Repentance* and *Mr. Gilfill's Love Story*. Her failures in a large part

of *Romola* and in *Felix Holt* have so much more interest than many a novel of lesser aims completely attained that one hesitates to mention their lesser distinction.

Her next venture, *Adam Bede*, if recognizably by the same hand as *Amos Barton*, is as different from it as possible. One evening in London in conversation with Lewes she described to him an episode in the life of an aunt of hers, a Methodist preacher. Visiting a town in the course of her calling, she found herself in the midst of extreme public excitement about a young girl who had murdered her child; and was condemned to be hung. The girl was like a creature in a trance of desperation and defiance, dumb and unrepentant. George Eliot's aunt visited her; and by the exercise simply of gentleness, sympathy and pity, soon induced her to pour out her whole tragic story; comforted her as well as she might; stayed with her all through the night; rode with her in the cart, in the terrible dawn to her inevitable execution. Lewes said that this prison scene would make "a fine element in a story," and it was around this episode that *Adam Bede* was built.

Reading the book after one is thirty, one appreciates with an especial admiration the subtlety of the novelist's delineation of the enormous social power of blind judgment. Milly Barton's tragedy is not caused by her husband, though he is too dull; and Hester's tragedy is not caused by Arthur Dimmesdale—though he is too weak. These catastrophes are wrought by the error and cruelty of social misjudgments, misjudgments strangely founded indeed on an intent of upholding human virtue, but basely shallow, hard and uninformed. It is this luminous perception of the author's in *Adam Bede* that gives the book its fine range in spite of the hard tragedy of its truth.

The Mill on the Floss repeating in a very different tone the tragedy of social misjudgment, is remarkably impressive in its masterly narrative of the economic fortunes of the Tulliver family. In her presentation of economic fortune as it touches domestic life, George Eliot is peerless. With plenty of common sense, with plenty of sympathy for sound, wordly ambition and plenty of humour and penetration about unsound wordly ambition, George Eliot's views of men's and women's occupation in general, and of the right

and helpful use of money, illumine her fiction with an extraordinary and original light of actuality.

Mr. Tulliver's loss of the mill affects one as one's knowledge of a murder might, with a sense of outrage, of despair and resentment; and when Tom makes up the last pound of the money for paying off the creditors and his father learns that the full amount of the sum he had expected would be three hundred pounds short, has been attained, you have a sense of contentment as complete as that you know when the Frog Prince resumes his rightful shape.

But the strongest tide in the fine current of *The Mill on the Floss* is neither its forcible narrative of the uses of human power in men's and women's occupation, nor the rush of its economic events, but its tremendous and varied story of love—not only of love in the sense of the desire of women and men, though in that tale, too, the book has greatness and absorbing interest—but the story of all the loves of a lifetime, of Maggie's and Tom's love as a brother and sister, of Mr. Tulliver's fathomless sense of protection of, delight and pride and tenderness for "the little wench," of Bob Jakins' passionate alliance with his childhood's friends, of Mrs. Tulliver's quick, unostentatious devotion to her daughter in despair, of Maggie's and Lucy's love for each other surviving through the sharpest pangs of jealousy, flowering with its own exquisite vigor like the blossoming staff.

George Eliot's diary for March 21st, 1860, says: "Finished this morning *The Mill on the Floss*, writing from the moment when Maggie carried out on the water thinks of her mother and brother. We hope to start for Rome on Saturday, 24th,

"Magnificat Anima mea."

It was on this Italian journey that she planned her Florentine novel *Romola*. Cosmopolitan was never easy for her; and *Romola* peculiarly drained her forces. She says that she began it a young woman; and when she had completed it she was an old woman. Everyone who is familiar with her general design as a composer of novels and creator of character will realize that she must have made to herself concerning this monumental effort every adverse discrimination perceptible to the reader.

The book remains overweighted with scholarship. A unique and original performance it seems to employ too massive, too heroic a manner for all its subjects. But it has its notable successes not only in Tito Melema, but in Savonarola. The characterization of the Titan monk, his faults, his nobility, his hidden weaknesses, his supreme devotion to his city, his cruel torture and death—the terrible scene of his martyrdom without the rewards of martyrdom, is a delineation by a master hand; and has a Shakespearean depth and scope.

If *Romola's* life left George Eliot an old woman, it left her not too old to create in the pages of *Middlemarch* and of *Daniel Deronda* numbers of men and women whose fortunes one never wearies of following. Even now at a distance of four generations and half of the world away from the scene of their first appearance people still talk about these men and women as though they were actual inhabitants of the globe. "How *could* she marry Casaubon?" "I think she never ought to have gone to see Rosamond Vincy."

About Gwendolen and Grandcourt indeed, the reading population never seems to stop talking—about what they ought to have done, and why they didn't do it, and why Gwendolen broke her promise to Mrs. Glasher. In the midst of a vast concourse of mere paper dolls, the Meyricks, Deronda's mother, Mirah, and all the other unbelievable creatures, George Eliot somehow produces some of the most brilliant and dramatic scenes in letters—quite unlike in their worldly tone any of her other presentments, and comparable in their vivid, brilliantly peopled effect to Daudet's famous ball in the first chapters of *Sappho*, or Mignon's dance around the supper table in *Wilhelm Meister*. The archery contest, the yacht scene, the gambling scene, the wild confidence at the Whispering Stones, all are made of the material of real romance; and whenever you pick them out, and read them over, you think, with excitement, how masterly they are.

They are masterly; but you do have to pick them out; and in the shorter tale of *Silas Marner*—I prefer the subtitle *The Weaver of Raveloe*—you pick out nothing. It is all irresistible. The whole narrative has a keen, refreshing fragrance, like that of the Forest of Arden, without a

tinge of the softness of sentimentality, but of an extraordinary and satisfying sweetness. But there is another and doubtless lower reason why one enjoys *The Weaver of Raveloe* and *The Mill on the Floss*. It is because they are hospitable and flattering books that seem to increase the importance of the casual reader; seem to welcome you in as a traveler through life, to understand you and to appreciate the sharp lights and shadows of the life you know, deeply though it may differ from the life of these great tales.

III.

In the spring of 1869, after writing her long poem, *The Spanish Gypsy*, George Eliot refreshed herself by a visit to Rome. Here she and her husband received a call from acquaintances of his who especially charmed both of them.

They were a Mrs. Cross of England, a clever elderly lady from Weybridge, her married daughter and son-in-law, and her son, an impressionable English youth. He loved and appreciated George Eliot's books and the spirit that created them; and tells us he was better acquainted with them than with any other literature. His imagination was touched by George Eliot's meeting with his mother, and indeed to any poetic perception his hostess' appreciation of the lives and powers of women would naturally be remarkably stirring and magnetic. The entire occasion was lit with glamour for his boyish fancy; and long afterwards he wrote of it, and his vision of George Eliot, at that time about fifty years of age.

I have a very vivid recollection of George Eliot sitting on a sofa with my mother by her side, entirely engrossed with her . . . I still seem to hear, as I first heard them, the low, earnest, deep musical tones of her voice; I still seem to see the fine brows with the abundant auburn-brown hair framing them, the long head broadening at the back, the gray-blue eyes, constantly changing in expression, but always with a very loving, almost deprecating, look at my mother, the finely-formed, thin, transparent hands, and a whole *Wesen* that seemed in complete harmony with everything one expected from the author of *Romola*.

It will be perceived that in everything affecting George Eliot, Mr. Cross felt huge, cloudy symbols of a high romance. It was the beginning of a long and deep family attachment between them, expressed in many letters and visits in the next ten years.

At Lewes' and George Eliot's new establishment, the

Priory, Cross knew her not only as a celebrity but as a genius, an intimate friend. On the other hand most of the people—indeed all but himself, one may say, who have left us records of her—who saw her at the Priory, knew her as a famed and important personage, and in the last years of her life; and it is to these visitors that we owe the impression of her, the passing aspect I have mentioned, which has become characteristic of her for so many readers.

The guests attended her famed Sunday afternoons in the Priory; and listened to Lewes, always fascinating and versatile, as a raconteur, and talked with her in her lace head-dress and dark silk gown, a tall, graceful lady, with a deep, quiet voice. In hers and Lewes finely collected library of many thousand of exceedingly valuable books, she used to sit in a long armchair near the fireplace with the proof-engraving of Du Maurier's "Tito Melema" hanging over the mantelpiece. The Priory, a rather large house in Regent's park, surrounded by an acre and a half of wooded grounds, seems to have been an unpretentious and distinguished establishment; and the visitors who talked here with the cleverest man and the most famous woman writer of the mid-nineteenth century in England were so charmed by their sincerity, their wonderful mental range, and their native elimination of trivialities that this impression has obliterated almost all other conceptions of George Eliot's presence and spiritual endowment.

Yet the finest faculty of that endowment is, in my view, not her wide mental range, valuable as that gift is in her equipment as a writer, but in her power of intimate perception. "Her talk I think was always most enjoyable *a deux*," says Mr. Cross. Nearly seven years after their meeting in Rome, she writes to him, after a few weeks' absence of his from England:

What a comfort that you are at home again and well. The sense of your nearness has been so long missing to us, that we had begun to take up life as inevitably a little less cheerful than we remembered it to have been formerly.

When Lewes died, a decade after the beginning of their family friendship with Cross, the young man was one of the first persons she was willing to see after the long break-down of hers that resulted from her grief and shock. He was acquainted with grief, with the thought of death and despair.

As she said of someone else, "His soul had known sorrow and love." Surrounding her hours with sympathy, with gentleness and protection he became, before two years had passed, indispensable to her.

They married in May. She died only eight months after their union; and he has left us in his biography of her, one of the most remarkable, most subtly expressive and deep-hearted books the world possesses. We have many works in many forms describing to us the emotional life of women. No other narrative I know records so completely and sympathetically as Cross' biography of George Eliot, the mental life of any of her sex.

It is a book one is glad to read with her novels, as a revelation of the spirit that expressed in many of their stories and scenes, in the characters of many men and women, a sense of mortal passion, of work, of money, of love, of sorrow and struggle and staunchness never expressed before, never to be expressed again in quite the same way.

"It was often in her mind and on her lips," Mr. Cross says of her, "that the only worthy end of all learning, of all science, of all life, in fact, is, that human beings should love one another better."

This inner music sounds from all her novels. Especially its movement carries the reader along in her masterpiece, *The Mill on the Floss*, one of the great creations, the great prides of our race, with an irresistible truth and beauty. Far, piercing bells of a thousand memories call in the distance of its wide-ranging pages. The flood of all one's mysterious days flows with it towards the unknown sea; and when Tom, turning to Maggie in the last moment before they drown together knows suddenly after his long blindness, the pain, the warm devotion of her lifetime, something in one rises and prays never again to fail in the human perception and affection which is our best mortal hope of happiness, and without which we are worthless.

Something in one prays and is comforted as the waters close over the brother and sister together carrying them away to eternity; and the peace that passes understanding breathes over one, as one thinks of them and of the heart born a hundred years ago that created them to live on so deeply in our hearts today.

EDITH FRANKLIN WYATT.